

<b>Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>
Epping Forest & Commons	9 July 2012
<b>Subject:</b> EPPING FOREST ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME for Access & Habitats 2012-13 <b>UPDATE</b>	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 23/12	<b>For Decision</b>

### Summary

The Annual Work programme for Epping Forest for the period April 2012 to March 2013 inclusive was presented to Committee in May.

Following this preview, the work programme was then referred to the Epping Forest Management Plan Steering Group on 15 June 2012 for further discussion.

This report responds to the issues discussed at the Steering Group and seeks final approval for the proposed operations. The predominant habitat conservation operations are wood-pasture restoration and grassland management reflecting the priorities of the Management Plan, the Keystone Tree and Grazing Strategies (in the Branching Out Project) and the targets for maintaining SSSI Favourable Condition. The pace and extent of wood-pasture restoration was a matter of concern alongside the financial resource commitment required to sustain the programme in future years. These matters will be addressed through proposals in the next Epping Forest Management Plan.

External funding for the habitat management work currently amounts to more than £300,000 annually and this covers around 65% of the full operating costs of the four in-house Conservation Operations teams. In addition, a further £75,000 in annual funding is made available by the Heritage Lottery Fund for staffing associated with the Keystone Trees restoration programme until 2014. Further information is provided on the pond restoration programme, heritage landscapes and grasslands.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that:

- you approve the Annual Work Programme as summarised in the report (SEF 12/12) to your May Committee.

## Main Report

### **Background**

1. This report follows the full work programme report presented to Committee in May (SEF 12/12) and subsequently reviewed at the Epping Forest Management Plan Steering Group on 15 June 2012.
2. The report provides additional information and clarification on the issues raised at the Steering Group meeting.

### **Current Position**

3. The access and habitats work programme will be carried out by in-house conservation and maintenance staff supplemented by contractors for specific specialist operations. It does not cover the significant amount of sports-related work carried out each year in the Forest at Chingford Golf Course, Wanstead Flats and the Conservators three tenanted golf courses at Loughton, Theydon Bois and Woodford Green.
4. The responsibility for maintaining the favourable condition of the Site of Special Interest (SSSI) and its UK Priority Habitat of wood-pasture (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) is fundamental to the setting of priorities in the annual habitat work programme. The Epping Forest SSSI contains the 3 main types of lowland wood-pasture recognised in the UK: – Hornbeam-Oak, mixed Oak and Beech-Oak. No other SSSI contains this combination in such significant quantities and as the SSSI citation states Epping Forest is: *“one of only few remaining large-scale examples of ancient wood-pasture in lowland Britain...”*.
5. Each type of wood-pasture requires a different approach to management, but with grazing and the creation of new pollards as shared objectives. Epping Forest contains a very wide range of pollard densities but has amongst the highest densities of pollards of any site in Europe. In the Hornbeam-Oak wood-pasture the pollarding programme for the Hornbeam pollards has been an underlying strategy informing the annual work programme for selected compartments for over 20 years. The Keystone Tree and Grazing Strategies provide further underlying rationale and frameworks for the other areas of wood-pasture in the Forest.
6. The pace and extent of wood-pasture restoration was a matter of concern to some members of the Steering Group, particularly with regard to the degree of clearance in some areas; the adequacy of cattle grazing densities as currently proposed and the financial resources required to sustain the

programme in future years. These matters will be addressed through proposals in the next Epping Forest Management Plan.

7. Recognition of these habitat priorities and the overall limit to resources has meant that pond restoration or de-silting has not been a main priority since 2004, following 5 main pond restorations between 1998 and 2003. This approach, which has many of the same resource sustainability issues associated with wood-pasture, was set out clearly in the approved Epping Forest Management Plan.
8. Nonetheless, considerable volunteer resources are put to pond management work each year based on priorities established in the 1998 Management Plan and subsequent regular surveys and assessments by staff and specialist consultants.
9. For example, in 2011 a survey of 142 of the 157 mapped Forest ponds (the other 15 are ephemeral and were dried out) was carried out by the in-house ecology team to assess the distribution and coverage of New Zealand Pigmyweed *Crassula helmsii*. The survey found 19 ponds (13%) where this damaging non-native and invasive species was present. Proposals to reduce and limit the coverage of this plant will be developed over the next 12 months and ponds chosen for work will be conservation priorities in future years. Other proposed work on ponds is outlined below.

## **Proposals**

10. The proposals for this financial and operational year were re-examined at the Epping Forest Management Plan Steering Group meeting. The issue of the balance of resources allocated between amenity, access and habitat conservation was raised. Issues concerning the priorities for pond work, the state of the Forest's grasslands and heaths, grazing levels and the protection of Forest heritage sites were also discussed.
11. The resources applied to the work programme, and much reactive work that is not detailed in the programme, is spread across a number of different teams as well as contractors. For example, the Maintenance Team will carry out the majority of minor and reactive public access and infrastructure maintenance work this year, alongside the sports turf teams at Chingford Golf Course and the Wanstead Flats playing fields. Major works such as the surfacing and repair of the ride network, which this year is likely to amount to between £50 - 60,000, will be carried out by specialist contractors.
12. The Conservation Operations Teams who carry out habitat conservation also carry out a considerable amount of access work and operations related

to the safety of the public. For the Grasslands Team 25% of its time during the year is spent on amenity grassland mowing, clearing sight lines and verges, mowing reservoir embankments and similar work.

13. For the 3 arborist teams 25% of their work is put towards managing tree safety and an additional £10 – 12,000 per year is spent on contractors to carry out further roadside tree safety work where complex traffic control is required.
14. In relation to ponds, a repeat survey of the 1998 and 1999 Forest-wide amphibian surveys will begin this year. In 2012-13 populations of amphibians and, in particular the European protected species the Great Crested Newt, will be assessed across 40 ponds with work completed in May 2013. A further 40 ponds will then be surveyed in 2013-14.
15. This work is to be supported with funding from the City Bridge Trust and will be used, alongside the Crassula survey and data on other scarce species held on the Forest's Scarce Species Register, to determine priorities for habitat conservation work on Forest Ponds in the future.
16. In the meantime the main habitat work planned for ponds this year includes the Scout Project work on Bulrush Pond in August and the programme of tasks organised by the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers. These latter tasks include work on Lodge Road Bog and Wake Valley Pond West before October, with more tasks to be organised for the winter period.
17. Heritage sites are receiving more attention and previously proposed Integrated Site Plans (in the 2004 Management Plan) for Loughton Camp and Ambresbury Banks have been developed into Conservation Management Plans (CMPs) for these sites in a format recognised by the Heritage Lottery Fund; English Heritage and Natural England. Discussions on the sometimes conflicting heritage and nature conservation proposals for these sites are being held with these two agencies. Priorities for action and balancing the needs of biodiversity and heritage conservation will be further refined based on these discussions this year and brought to your Committee for consideration in due course.
18. The status of Knighton Woods' heritage is being examined with English Heritage and, in the meantime volunteer work has and will be carried out to maintain the interest features identified there by the Integrated Site Plan. Funding for a Conservation Management Plan has been identified for this heritage landscape.
19. Funding for further work on a Wanstead Park CMP has also been identified by the City Surveyor, with an indication that further grant

support may be available from English Heritage. The sustainability tests which the Environment Agency are proposing for new abstraction permissions at Wanstead Park from 2013 will guide the scoping priorities for the CMP. Further major works to the Grade II\* Park and Garden of Special Historic interest are not proposed until the CMP has been considered by your Committee.

20. Plans for reducing the erosion of the Pillow Mounds and protecting the surrounding soils and ancient trees at High Beach will be developed this year also. Work on a Highams Park CMP will also start in parallel to the feasibility study for works to the Large Raised Reservoir dam at this location.
21. The western grasslands of the Forest, Fernhills in particular, were highlighted for concern. Although the grazing there has helped scarce species like Adder's-tongue and Creeping Jenny to expand their range across the site, in other areas the scrub has coalesced significantly since the site was taken into the Forest by the Conservators. Grazing will continue there this year and from the late summer and autumn additional Epping Forest Conservation Volunteer tasks and staff time will be allocated to accelerate the scrub control and coppicing work of the last few years.
22. In addition to this, the nearby Trueloves will be fenced to allow grazing to take place as proposed in the Epping Forest Grazing Strategy. The periodic late summer mowing of the invasive Michaelmas Daisy at this site will also be continued with a cut this year in one of the fields, provided weather conditions allow.
23. Elsewhere across the Forest the mowing and scrub coppicing programmes and grazing will continue as set out in the annual work programme submitted to the Committee in May (Report SEF12/12).
24. The work to introduce a network of invisible fencing will also continue following the successful trials at Fairmead last year. This should allow grazing in new areas and more targeted grazing over the coming years as proposed in the Epping Forest Grazing Strategy, which forms a key part of both the HLF-funded *Branching Out* Project and the strategy for maintaining favourable condition of the SSSI. The requirement for a grazing business plan as set out in the report on the new Grazing Contract approved by Committee in January this year will be the subject of a November report to Committee.

## Financial Implications

25. The work outlined in the proposed work programme (Report SEF 12/12) is covered by the local risk budget of the Epping Forest Division supplemented by the Single Payment Scheme (SPS). This is further enhanced with targeted grant-aid payments from The Heritage Lottery Fund, The Tubney Charitable Trust and from the government statutory conservation agency Natural England (NE), under the Environmental Stewardship Scheme. In addition to the annual grant from NE there are further capital works grants available.
26. The financial and staff resources for these operations were examined at the Steering Group meeting and the current position and future funding were set out.
27. The habitat conservation programme is currently supported by annual external grants of over £300,000, an amount that covers around 65% of the Conservation Operations Teams' costs of £465,000. In contrast, in 2004 at the last review of the Epping Forest Management Plan the external grant income was £75,000. The current income, therefore, represents a substantial increase in resources. The Stewardship income is secured until 2018 with changes to the Single Payment Scheme due in 2014.
28. In addition, further staff resources have been achieved with an Arborist Team Leader and 3 Arborist apprentices currently supported by a 74% grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and further supplementary funding from the Tubney Charitable Trust. The funding for the *Branching Out* project from these sources runs until the end of 2014.
29. Additional volunteer resources have also been sought in the last few years as a result of the *Branching Out* Project, with the appointment of the Volunteer Development Officer and a subsequent increase in coordinated volunteer activity. The Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers' programme is focused on the habitat conservation priorities of the Management Plan and is fully supported by in-house staff operations.
30. The work that these extra resources have been put towards is drawn from programmes set out in the approved Epping Forest Management Plan and subsequent strategies and plans. These include the Keystone Tree and Grazing Strategies that are fundamental to the *Branching Out* Project and which have attracted significant financial and staff resources

## **Legal Implications**

31. The habitats work programme is carried out under the Conservators' powers provided by the Epping Forest Act 1878. Within the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) the programmed work has received the statutory written consent from Natural England under Section 28 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the Countryside & Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000).

## **Strategic Implications**

### ***City Together***

32. The work, proposals and options outlined in the programme meet the *City Together* vision of a *World Class City* and, specifically, 2 of its 5 themes: "A world class City that supports our communities" and "A World Class City which protects, promotes and enhances our environment".

### ***Open Spaces Department Business Plan***

33. The proposals in the annual programme follow from 3 of the Open Spaces Department's Strategic Aims of: "providing high quality accessible Open Spaces and services in accordance with nationally recognised standards for the benefit of London and the Nation"; "involving communities in the management of our sites" and "adopting sustainable working practices, promoting the variety of life (biodiversity) and protecting the Open Spaces for the enjoyment of future generations".

### ***Epping Forest Management Plan***

34. This update report, and the earlier work programme, also match the Epping Forest Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in particular:
- "Epping Forest's position as a unique and ancient landscape for people and wildlife will be strengthened;
  - "The Forest will retain its natural aspect with the diversity of wildlife habitats enhanced and the features of international importance, including its veteran pollards, protected;
  - "Epping Forest will be highly valued as part of a larger and fully accessible protected landscape area".

## **Conclusions**

35. This update report to the annual work programme follows discussions at the Epping Forest Management Plan Steering Group. The report summarises the extra funding that has been gained to support the habitat conservation part of the programme and outlines the allocation of staff

resources to the programme. It is recognised that the grant-funded elements of the programme do pose questions with regard to the future sustainability of the work programme. Core priorities for future works will be a significant component of the next Epping Forest Management Plan. To address further concerns raised by the Steering Group additional information on the priorities and programmes for work on the grasslands, ponds and the heritage sites of the Forest is provided.

**Background Papers:**

*Epping Forest Annual Work Programme 2012-13. Report SEF 12/12 and Appendix 1 presented to Committee on 14 May 2012.*

*The Epping Forest Management Plan 2004 – 2010*

*The Barn Hoppitt Wood-pasture Restoration Plan 2006 – 2011*

*The Lords Bushes & Knighton Woods Integrated Site Plan 2004 – 2010*

*The Wanstead Flats Integrated Site Plan 2006 – 2011*

*Branching Out Stage II Project Plan (Nov 2008) (Chapters 15 Keystone Trees Strategy and 16 Grazing Strategy)*

*Environmental Stewardship guidelines (Natural England)*

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